How did Hitler change Germany from a democracy to a dictatorship, 1933-1934, and then reinforce this?

The Reichstag Fire

Once he was Chancellor, Hitler took steps to completely take over Germany. One of these was to gain a majority in the Reichstag and to do this he called another election. During the election campaign, the Reichstag burned to the ground and communist van der Lubbe was arrested for the crime. The Nazis exploited this situation for their own gain. Hitler said this was the start of a communist take over and demanded special, emergency powers to deal with the situation and was granted them by President Hindenburg. The Nazis used these powers to break up meetings of their opponents; arrest Communists and intimidate voters.

As the fire was such an important event in the Nazi’s rise to power, there has been much speculation over who really started the fire. The possible explanations for the fire are:

* Van der Lubbe acted alone
* Van der Lubbe acted on behalf of the Communists
* The SA started the fire, hoping to blame the communists and gain support for the Nazis

The election of March 1933

In the election of March 1933, Hitler and the Nazis gained a majority and could now pass laws legally. Hitler managed this by gaining support of the Nationalists, who wanted to see Germany become great again. He then gained the support of the Centre Party by promising to protect the Catholic church in Germany. To ensure success, Hitler used his emergency powers to ban the communists from the Reichstag and surrounded it with heavily armed SA members.

The Enabling Act

Hitler still didn’t have enough support to have complete control of Germany. An Enabling Act would give him the right to pass laws for the next four years without having to obtain the support of the Reichstag. However, as it was a change in constitution, Hitler needed two-thirds in favour (rather than the usual half), he had just over half. Hitler ordered the SA to continue intimidating the opposition and the 81 communist members of the Reichstag were expelled. In an atmosphere heavy with threat and violence, the Enabling Act was passed 441 votes to 94. Hitler was given the power to rule for four years without consulting the Reichstag.

The Elimination of Political Opposition

The Communist Party had been banned and the Centre Party had decided to co-operate with the Nazi’s rather than be treated like Communists, in return they kept control of Catholic Schools. Using the powers of the Enabling Act, he outlawed any other parties and Germany became a one party state, Germany now had a dictatorship.

With all opposing parties gone, Hitler turned on the trade unions. On 2 May 1933, Nazi’s broke into trade union offices all over the country and arrested thousands of trade union officials. Unions were banned and workers became part of the German Labour Front.

On 30 June 1934, on the Night of the Long Knives, the SA was disbanded. Once he gained power, Hitler’s priority was to rid himself of possible rivals. Rohm, the leader of the SA had played a huge part in helping Hitler achieve power. But the army saw the SA as a rival, the army would not support Hutler unless the SA disbanded. Hitler himself was also suspicious of Rohm, he had talked about turning the SA into the second army and Hitler feared Rohms control over such a big force. Hitler made a deal with the generals. They promised to support him as Commander-in-Chief of the army if the SA was disbanded and if commenced rearmament. Hitler accused Rohm of trying to over throw and murder him. Over the weekend Rohm and 400 SA members were executed by SS squads.

A month later, President Hindenburg died. Hitler combined his roles as Chancellor, President and Commander-in-Chief of the army and became known as der Fuhrer (the leader). On 2 August 1934, the army swore an oath of personal loyalty to Hitler as der Fuhrer. They agreed to stay out of politics and serve Hitler. In return, Hitler spent vast sums on rearmament, brought back conscription and made plans to make Germany a great military power again.

One Party Law and Order

By 1933, Germany was a totalitarian state, there was one party with no opposition. Anyone who openly criticised Hitler was imprisoned or worse. Hitler was all powerful in making decisions. Hitler used these techniques to support his totalitarian state.

The Gestapo:

* The Gestapo were the secret state police
* They could arrest citizens on suspicion and send them to concentration camps without explanation or trial.
* They were led by Reinhand Heydrich
* As the German public thought the Gestapo were so powerful and were so scared of them, many informed on each other because they thought the Gestapo would find out anyway.

The SS

* Formed in 1925 from fanatics loyal to Hitler
* Led by Heimrich Himmler.
* All Aryans, highly trained and loyal to Hitler
* Used terror tactics to intimidate, arrest and even kill Hitler’s opponenets.

Concentration Camps

The Gestapo could hold anyone arrested in ‘protective custody’ in a concentration camp. They were set up almost as soon as Hitler took power. The first ones were makeshift prisons in old factories or warehouses. Soon these became purpose built camps. The prisoners had to do hard labour with limited food and harsh beatings. By the late 1930s, death camps had been introduced and had become increasingly popular. Jews, socialists, communists, trade unionists, churchmen and any critisisers of the Nazis were sent to these camps, and very few emerged alive. The camps were run by the SS unit, the Death Head.

The Media

* No books could be published without Goebbels permission
* In 1933 a book burning was organised where Nazi students publically burned books that were unacceptable according to Nazi policy
* Only Nazi approved painters could show their works
* Newspapers were controlled

Propaganda

The main aim of propaganda was to provide the German people with the Nazi view of events. The other aim was to target groups who were seen as enemies, for example: Jews, the allies, communists and socialists. The Minister of Propaganda use his powers to censor all that reached and influenced the German people

* All newspapers were censored and were only allowed to print stores that were favourable to Hitler and the Nazis
* Radio was controlled by the government and cheap radios were manufactured so that they were widely available, meaning the Nazi message could reach them.
* The Nazis took control of the German film industry. German films in the 1930s showed German heroes defeating their enemies such as Jews and communist.
* Cartoons were used to show Jews as weak and devious.
* Goebbels ordered mass rallies. The most spectacular was the Nuremberg Rallies, held every year. They showed the German people the power of the state and convinced them that ‘every other German supported Hitler’
* The 1936 Olympics were used to suggest the superiority of the Aryan race.

Control of education and youth movements, and the churches

* All teachers had to belong to the German Teachers League and follow a Nazi curriculum
* Textbooks were rewritten in support of Nazi ideas and history, telling how the German army was ‘stabbed in the back’ by weak politicians and how the German troubles were caused by Jews squeezing the profit out of honest German people.
* Outside school, children and teenagers joined youth groups such as Hitler Youth and the German Maidens.

In 1933, the Catholic Church signed an agreement with Hitler. Both sides agreed not to interfere with each other. The Nazi’s took over the Protestant churches in Germany under the Reich Church. Many Christians accepted this because they were Nazi supporters